

Care of the Dying at the John A. Burns School of Medicine University of Hawaii

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In the first year of medical school, our students spend one-half day a week (15 weeks) in a community hospice experience. They go through a 20-hour orientation program, either at St. Francis Medical Center or at the Queen's Medical Center. They are then assigned their own patient, whom they visit once a week for the 15-week period. Often, students develop strong relationships with terminally ill patients and continue the hospice experience until the patient dies. It is a rich and touching experience for some students, coming early in their medical education.

During the first two years, students meet in tutorials and study a total of 70 different health care problems. Among these problems are patients and their families who must deal with death and dying. Some examples of these situations are a 50-year-old nurse with breast cancer, an adult male with transitional cell carcinoma, and a lone immigrant to Hawaii with colon cancer.

In these tutorials, the students are encouraged to discuss not only the biological and clinical aspects of the problems, but the populational and behavioral aspects of the case, including death and dying. Many of these discussions are truly profound. Some are superficial, depending on the makeup of the tutorial as well as the maturity and readiness of the student to discuss these issues, and the ability of the tutor to facilitate discussion.

Our medical school has also offered colloquia by Max Botticelli, MD, S.Y. Tan, MD, Mitsuo Aoki, DD, and Kenneth Kipnis, PhD on subjects such as "Death and Dying," "Palliative Care," and "Ethical Issues in Death and Dying."

While we have no formal courses on "Care of the Dying" or "Choice in Dying," our students are exposed to these problems by the methods described above. Whether or not these experiences are effective is unknown at this time.

Editor's Note:

Beginning this fall, ten medical schools across the country will develop and test models that will integrate death and dying into their existing programs. Regrettably, the University of Hawaii is not one of these participating schools. At the end of the five-year project, Choice in Dying, the funding agency based in New York City, will compile the results into a technical manual that will then help other schools integrate similar death and dying teaching into their programs. Further information can be obtained from Choice in Dying, 200 Varick Street, New York, NY 10014. Fax 212-366-5337. Phone 212-366-5540.

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